Almost One Third of U.S. Warplanes Are Drones

By Spencer Ackerman and Noah Shachtman

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Theme: **Militarization and WMD**

Remember when the military actually put human beings in the cockpits of its planes? They still do, but in far fewer numbers. According to a new congressional report acquired by Danger Room, drones now account for 31 percent of all military aircraft.

To be fair, lots of those drones are tiny flying spies, like the Army's Raven, that could never accommodate even the most diminutive pilot. (Specifically, the Army has 5,346 Ravens, making it the most numerous military drone by far.) But in 2005, only five percent of military aircraft were robots, a report by the Congressional Research Service notes. Barely seven years later, the military has 7,494 drones. Total number of old school, manned aircraft: 10,767 planes.

A small sliver of those nearly 7,500 drones gets all of the attention. The military owns 161 Predators — the iconic flying strike drone used over Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere — and Reapers, the Predator's bigger, better-armed brother.

But even as the military's bought a ton of drones in the past few years, the Pentagon spends much, much more money on planes with people in them. Manned aircraft still get 92 percent of the Pentagon's aircraft procurement money. Still, since 2001, the military has spent $26 billion on drones, the report — our Document of the Day — finds.

The drones are also getting safer. (To operate, that is; not for their targets below.) Drone crashes get a lot of attention; 38 Predators and Reapers have crashed in Iraq and Afghanistan thus far; most recently, Iran looks like it got ahold of an advanced, stealthy RQ-170 Sentinel. But the congressional report finds that the Predator, for instance, has only 7.5 accidents per 100,000 hours of flight, down from 20 accidents over that time in 2005 — meaning it's now got an accident rate comparable to a (manned) F-16.

But the report doesn't mention some of the unique vulnerabilities of the drones. There's no mention of the malware infection that reached into the drone cockpits at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, a story Danger Room broke. Nor does it go into the workload problems for military imagery analysts caused by the proliferation of the drones full-motion video "Death TV," which is pushing the military toward developing selective or "thinking" cameras. The ethical issues attendant to remote-control war also go unexplored.

Still, the report does explore the downsides of the Pentagon's drone obsession. There are way too many redundant drones, it finds, and the expensive sensors they increasingly carry drive the costs of a supposedly cheap machine up. They're also bandwidth hogs: a single Global Hawk drone requires 500 megabytes per second worth of bandwidth, the report finds, which is "500 percent of the total bandwidth of the entire U.S. military used during the 1991 Gulf War." And it also notes that a lot of future spy missions might go not to drones,

but to the increasing number of giant blimps and aerostats, some of which can carry way more sensors and cameras.

And the current fleet of flying robots is just the start. The Navy's developing a next-gen drone that can take off and land from an aircraft carrier. Future missions, the report finds, include "stand-off jamming" of enemy electronics; "psychological operations, such as dropping leaflets" over an adversary population; and even measuring the amount of radiation in the earth's atmosphere. The military's working on increasingly autonomous drones — including tiny, suicidal killers — and on increasing the number of drones a single ground station can operate.

The Air Force even holds out hope for a "super/hyper-sonic" drone by 2034. It's a good time to be a flying robot.

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